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## ORAL SPANISH

Since the direct method has come into vogue, schools and colleges have been paying more and more attention to the acquisition of the spoken language. But though we have emphasized more and more the oral side of language instruction our success in this phase of language teaching has not materially or proportionately increased. The average language student after four or five years of a foreign language still finds himself with but a very halting oral command of it, though he reads it readily enough. My own experience has proved to me that it is a comparatively easy matter to acquire a reading knowledge of a foreign language, but the acquisition of the spoken language, the fixing of speech habits to the point of automatization is a different matter. I have finally concluded that modern language teachers are trying to do too much. In language work, as in everything else, concentration and specialization bring bigger results than any attempt to master everything at once. This attempt to give the student everything at once is, I believe, what has been, and what is, working havoc with modern language teaching. How is it possible in two or three years of study to acquire a faultless pronunciation, a mastery of the printed page, and a fluent oral and written command of the language unless some division of effort is made? Some division must be made in modern language courses whereby concentration on one phase or another of language learning will result, perhaps in conformance with the special needs or desires of the student. If it is a rapid-reading knowledge he wants let him concentrate on acquiring a large *passive* vocabulary by reading a great deal. If it is a speaking knowledge he desires above all else, he must learn a selected vocabulary of practical every-day words for active use through use, and, moreover, his command of the language must be made automatic. Such a division of aim could be made as soon as the student had acquired the elements of grammar. Language teachers here and there are already following out that line of thought, for we hear of "rapid reading courses" and practically all universities have "conversation courses." Some high schools, too, are separating students for active and passive language control. Taking it for granted, then, that such a division is to be made, let me point out some principles underlying oral mastery of a language and the establishment of motor control. I shall illustrate with Spanish.

In the first place, *oral* command is not possible without *aural* training. The student must learn to recognize sounds, not isolated sounds, but as they occur in their varying forms in the process of assimilation within the sentence. For example, his ear should distinguish various types of the Spanish *n*: Un clavo (un klavo); un vaso (um baso); triunfo (triumfo) and so forth. To develop this ability two things are necessary: he must thoroughly understand the phonetic principles underlying the production of Spanish sounds and must have plenty of opportunity to hear the language spoken. The first involves a study of the more *practical* phases of Spanish phonetics, especially the specific conformations of the oral cavity with tongue, lip, and jaw positions for individual and assimilated sounds. This physical aspect of sound production will

react favorably on the student's oral manipulation of Spanish. The organs of speech will come to recognize these successive conformations and positions through registration in the brain, and through successive repetitions ideomotor coördination will result. The importance of this for acquiring oral fluency cannot be over-emphasized. In learning to speak a language both sensory and motor brain centers are active, and it is important that the stimuli be as varied as possible so that a deep and lasting impression may be made on the connecting nerve fibers. It, therefore, behooves the teacher of oral Spanish to have a short, daily phonetic drill.

We now come to the question of acquiring actual, motor, automatic control of spoken Spanish. The term *automatic* is important, for it indicates that speech "habits" must be organized and developed until as little recourse as possible is had to the higher brain centers, leaving them free for their proper critical and analytical functions. And only as motor responses become automatic can the student be said to have gained oral *fluency*. What are the fundamental principles for making acts automatic and establishing them as habits? Psychologists tell us that the frequent *repetition* of an act tends to make it reflex. At first the higher centers of consciousness direct but gradually the lower, reflex centers take up the act and eventually repeat it without the intervention of consciousness. Then the act is automatic. Applying this principle to oral Spanish it is evident that automatic control of speech must be established by frequent *repetition*. This does not mean parrot-like repetition of something the mind does not understand, for the first law of the learning process is *apperception*. Nor does it mean memorizing long passages of prose or poetry, for in doing this the *attention* would be centered more on the development of the thought than on the language used. But it does mean memorizing by constant repetition short, snappy type sentences that will allow the attention to be fixed on the form. One sentence should be taken at a time, its grammatical construction and thought content mastered, and then with the attention consciously fixed on the exact reproduction of the sentence orally it should be repeated again and again until the tongue fulfills its function smoothly, and no conscious intervention is needed to keep the tongue moving over the word combination. It is important that each sentence so repeated be *correct* so that no wrong speech-habits be formed.

Here, then, is a principle which the teacher of conversation may utilize to bring about fluency. It is evident that a student cannot receive a sufficient amount of such oral drill in the classroom to bring about ideomotor coördination. Consequently, the teacher must require the student to drill himself outside of class *viva voce* on a set of sentences previously studied and explained in class. A composition book that contains short, snappy sentences and stresses common idioms with a thoroughly practical vocabulary can be made the basis for this work. It should drill on essential features of grammar, not once, but over and over again. A slow, painstaking mastery of such a book sentence by sentence will put the student a long way on the road to oral Spanish. When such sentences are assigned for drill outside the classroom it must not be forgotten that students will make the most rapid progress practicing each sentence an initial number of times with an interval of

rest, then repeating again with a longer interval of rest, and so on until the tongue no longer hesitates and rapidity has been acquired.

Someone will object to this Chinese-like method, contending that one could not possibly thus memorize and make automatic all the sentences in the language; therefore at any moment one might be called upon to say something that one had not made automatic. Quite true, but the student who had learned, say, one thousand basic or type sentences, the grammatical construction and thought content of which he understood, would have no trouble in making the necessary substitutions in the new sentence. I have stressed the importance of apperception as a constant factor in the process of automatization. If the student then had learned such a sentence as "tengo que ir a la escuela todos los días" he could easily make the proper substitutions if confronted with the necessity of saying such a sentence as "Vd. tiene que venir a mi casa todos los domingos." Thus anyone who had made automatic one thousand basic sentences—that is, sentences based on the most frequently used verbs in their most frequent ordinary and idiomatic forms combined with nouns, adjectives, and other parts of speech of frequent occurrence—would have a good elementary command of oral Spanish. He would have a workable foundation or framework on which to build up a wider command of the language by gradually adding to his vocabulary synonyms, antonyms, and idioms in which Spanish is so rich.

In making this process the basis of a conversation course, what would be the function of the class hour? The necessity of thoroughly understanding what one is making automatic has already been stressed. This would be the first function of the class hour. The teacher would explain the construction and make clear the thought content. Another function would be the daily phonetic drill already mentioned. The class hour would also serve for the final stage of the learning process, the application of that which has been learned. Having learned or automatized a set of sentences previously assigned, the class could spend a large part of the hour making substitutions orally and in writing. Thus what had been learned would be permanently fixed. There would also be time for dictation exercises, reading aloud, hearing and speaking the language, defining by synonyms and antonyms. In the later stages of the course free composition, too, could be made use of, the student using here what he had already made automatic orally.

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